

Assistant Editor Laura Fano Morrissey interviews *Development* Editorial board member Shobha Raghuram from India. This interview focuses on the crisis of the current governance system and the institutional reforms needed in order to achieve a sustainable human development.

*Shobha Raghuram, philosopher and independent researcher, India*

**LF** In your article printed in Volume 52.3 you present a very interesting and moving parallel. You say that in the US children and teenagers drive the consumerist lifestyle, while 25,000 children die each day in the poorest villages of the world. What does this image show us of our society and how should we act on it?



**SR** One of the issues I was trying to raise is the fact that along with a growth-oriented development we have promoted cultures of gross consumption and the flip side of under-consumption and ill-beingness. I refer to the issues of market fundamentalism and over-consumption where children by the age of seven are aware of even the maps of malls (not restricted to the US alone); so large is the market that it totals around \$670 billion per year and this electronic mall culture is expected to attract world-over 200 million young people by 2011. That parents are accessed by markets through forcing unwanted needs on children is a serious issue as these children are denied access to a world view driven by values rather than markets. And secondly the other side of this world is that millions of children go hungry with almost 25,000 deaths of young children due to poverty related causes every day. Most children report that they simply don't have the human dignity that they deserve. Another thing that was also made evident to me when I was serving in the National Commission on the Protection of Child Rights was that children by the age of four are already being forced into child labour in agriculture due to increasing depths of rural misery. And so horrible is their condition that many of them suffer a slow death. It is a fact that there is no caring environment and the household is completely immersed in poverty, and I think it is time that we look at the world of these twin cultures and secondly that we look for a world driven far more by ethical perceptions of the commonality of our fate, living on a common planet. I don't see that sense of a shared perspective of the tragedies we have created because of over-consumption and self-interestedness.

**LF** In relation to the current crisis that we are experiencing, the bailout plans, especially in the US, have further reduced financing for development. How can we raise the importance of a development agenda in a society that finds \$700 billion to rescue banks but cannot provide enough funding for fighting hunger and malnutrition for example?

**SR** One would have assumed that during the economic recession there would be serious attempts among governments to reform systems where the basic services are bettered and increased by governments for the protection and promotion of the poor, basically what they would call the larger umbrella of social protection. One would have assumed that governments would have returned to looking at the role of the state in a far more enhanced and accountable fashion during the recession, but indeed the opposite seems to have happened. States are today subsidizing markets, rather than stepping in and accelerating protection for all citizens. If we look at the fact that Merrill Lynch received something like five billion dollars and this in bonuses, and it is around the same amount that went to Africa, we just wonder where exactly is the defining mediation and balancing of encounters between the private and the state. Basically I think that the poor have been continuously bailing out the markets and the states. The states represent the poor but in actual effect their outright

endorsement of the reform measures since the late 80's betrays their true intentions- a rapid integration of unequal economies into a global order that heightens the stark situations of the poor everywhere. We need to go back to a stronger role of the state but monitored by citizens and the efficiency of public services, particularly the area of education and health, with long-term perspectives on this, rather than short-term responses of governments. The role of the state has been under decline because of the general perception that if the state could not do it, then the market can do it better, but it is always been shown that it is not the role of markets to protect citizens, vulnerable populations. That is the direct responsibility of elected governments and therefore I think today more than ever the role of citizens comes centre stage- to be aware of our rights, to demand the accountable implementation of public services and to ensure that our voice and collective strength will guarantee real performance by elected governments.

**LF** Focusing on your own country, India, what do you think are the most pressing issues for the rural poor?

**SR** I would suggest that two of the most critical issues are that first in the 1980s we saw a decline in investment in agriculture, and a lack of non-farm sector employment. This already produced the problem of migration, where large numbers of female headed households have come into evidence, and there has been a further rural pauperization of the poor. The cities have been overburdened because they have not been able to cope with the large extent of displacement of the poor who come there in search of work under highly unprotected and cruel conditions. The second issue is that the issue of the modernizing of development has never found the right answers in a democracy. The large scale projects that have been implemented without the consent of people in rural areas, especially infrastructure projects where people were not consulted and the measures undertaken by governments to ensure that they would be properly rehabilitated were never carried out. Given these conditions, one of the most significant tragedies I think is the issue of the migrant labour, and the fact that human beings have been dispossessed of their histories, dispossessed of their cultures, and dispossessed of the heritage that only they knew. I wonder if we have the right in the name of development to disinherit people of their histories; we are not even considering the fact that perhaps tomorrow the same thing may await us. Therefore my recommendation on this is never undertake projects without the full agreement of people involved and it must be in the public domain. If this is not done, we are seeing one of the largest tragedies of the twenty-first century, that there are waves of migration the world over, but also in India, and that migration is a massive distressing factor, reminding us that alongside the India of high growth is the other India of not just no growth but disinheritance. Governments have to decide whose side they are on. Development is needed but how and for whom is the issue. Development without social justice is self-serving.

**LF** What reforms do you think are needed in global development institutions to address this crisis?

**SR** So much has been written on this subject of much needed reforms that I feel it is time that simultaneously with critique there is a global movement of citizens for social justice and civil rights!

Having said that, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the two International Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Kyoto Protocol among others form the basis for some of the most progressive realization of regulations and rights in global human governance. Internationally agreed treaties protect human beings in their full realization of their rights. For example, Article 9, 'The Right to Social Security' in ICESCR is the right of everyone to social security including social insurance, shouldered both by national governments, and international bodies. And yet, see how the multilateral lending institutions have done their best to propagate a greater privatization of social security. Hence, I feel

that there should be a broad agreement on the principles of internationalism regarding development responsibilities towards all those too vulnerable to compete in a savage profit-oriented world and whose very condition is the result of skewed and power dominated political decisions.

We have already the basis for cooperation and yet there is a consistent erosion of these principles of sustainable development. Participatory democratic politics needs to influence development profoundly, in substance and in spirit. The larger issue has to do with the equalization of resources and assets. So sharp are the interventionist roles of transnational and military interests in the internal domestic policies of many countries that unless and until this is changed I see little possibility of seeing a world governed by social justice.

A healthy financial architecture including reforms in international trade, cancellation of debt burdens and the use of these additional finances for human development will be critical for equal and sustainable futures. Trade and military agreements need to be accountable to the UN. The United Nations and the other multilaterals, in substance and operationally, must rise to the challenges of forcing the world to deal with the root causes of poverty and inequality in the best traditions of parliamentary democratic politics rather than the use of military. We have to reject the military option as a form of legitimate discourse in global understandings and mediations. What I am suggesting like many others is not 'reforms', more of the same in a different guise, more pointless negotiations of the talking brigade but a hard repositioning of the international regime for building committed development. Abiding by principles that promote peace and equality as integral elements of a sense of justice, acceptable to everyone, calls for structural changes, not just 'reforms'.